# **State water regulators see role for Kern's oil industry in groundwater sustainability planning**

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**Body**

June 27-- Jun. 27--Contrary to what you may have heard, ***oil*** and water apparently mix just fine, especially with regard to California's landmark efforts to bring Central Valley groundwater pumping under control.

***Kern*** ***oil*** companies are, by all accounts, working closely with local and state authorities, sharing data and hydrological expertise, to help make sure the county's groundwater users comply with the controversial Sustainable Groundwater Management Act, better known as SGMA.

Local ***oil*** companies do use groundwater, after all, just not in the quantities many farmers do. They also pump wastewater from the ground before injecting it back down again.

But how ***oil*** and water activities should be blended to achieve the best results has recently been a source of some skepticism.

At a meeting last month in Bakersfield, frustrations reportedly arose during a private discussion among senior state water officials and members of ***Kern*** County's ***oil*** industry about what, exactly, is groundwater -- and how California's efforts to regulate its use will affect local petroleum production.

One person who was present, Sam Boland-Brien, manager until recently of the State Water Resource Control Board's Groundwater Management Program, said ***Kern*** oilmen were not aware, or pleased, that the state was considering looking at water quality as a way of helping define what aspects of local petroleum production fall within the auspices of SGMA, signed into law by former Gov. Jerry Brown in 2014.

"They didn't realize that (water quality issue) was a question," he said, adding that the state hopes to leave that and other questions to local planning agencies working to meet a Jan. 1 deadline for filing plans for making local groundwater use sustainable over the long term.

TOUCHY TOPIC

The discussion that day at Aera Energy LLC's Ming Avenue campus touches on a sensitive subject for local ***oil*** producers. Every barrel of ***oil*** they pump brings up many more barrels of "produced water," a highly saline wastewater. Another layer of regulation on produced water or any other oilfield activity is the last thing the petroleum industry wants.

Local oilman Chad Hathaway dismissed the notion that produced water should be regulated under SGMA. He noted the aquifers he extracts ***oil*** from, and those into which he injects produced water, are specifically exempted from the federal Safe Drinking Water Act.

But he does see important roles for ***oil*** producers under SGMA. Not only have they helped organize districts working toward local compliance with groundwater regulations and given them important data, he said, but they have the capability of cleaning up produced water for use in irrigation and other applications that could reduce the strain on ***Kern***'s groundwater supplies.

"That (reuse of produced water) to me is a huge, huge part that the ***oil*** and gas industry can play in SGMA," Hathaway said.

Uncertainties remain. Although officials with the State Water Resource Control Board emphasize they are not imposing new regulations on the ***oil*** industry, Bolen-Brien, now head of the agency's Division of Water Rights, said "it's too early to say" whether ***oil*** extraction could ever be regulated under SGMA.

BEST PRACTICES

A best-practices document released in December of 2016 by the state Department of Water Resources advises regulators characterize oilfield produced water "in terms of aquifer depletion, beneficial use, quality and reliability."

The document goes on to say local groundwater planning agencies trying to abide by SGMA should look at factors including the quality of produced water, whether its depletion will cause land subsidence and whether it is being reused in such a way that should be considered a net benefit to the local groundwater basin.

***Oil*** industry trade groups said in emailed statements Wednesday their local members are actively contributing to the work of groundwater sustainability agencies tasked with planning local SGMA compliance.

The Western States Petroleum Association said last month's meeting at Aera was "positive and productive" and that the organization looks forward to further engaging with state water officials on SGMA issues.

Another trade group, the Californian Independent Petroleum Association, said it and its members are also closely involved in the groundwater planning process.

A spokeswoman for Bakersfield-based Aera, meanwhile, said in an interview that the company views itself as having the same obligations under SGMA as any other local landowner.

"All of us in business, regardless of industry, have an obligation to protect the state's groundwater," spokeswoman Cindy Pollard said.

An earlier version of this story misspelled the name of former California Gov. Jerry Brown.

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